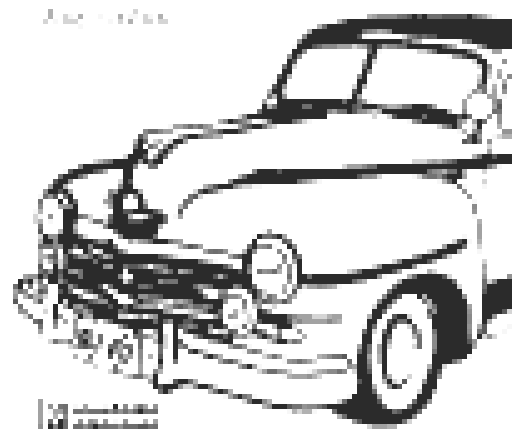


Christopher Paul Curtis, Brief Biography

Flint, Michigan, is home to many people who are originally from the South. Christopher Paul Curtis had heard some of his friends at the factory talk about driving south when they visited their relatives. Rather than splitting up the trip and staying overnight someplace along the way, they'd drive for many hours straight—however long it took to get there.



Curtis always wondered if he would be able to do the same, so when his wife's sister moved to Florida, he decided to give it a try. His wife wanted to plan the trip every step of the way, but he was set on driving twenty-four hours straight! Christopher, his wife, Kaysandra, and their son Steven were on their way to Florida. Little did they know that the trip would become the basis of Curtis's first book.

Curtis says, "That's how the story got started. It was about a family taking a trip and the year was 1963, but the story was called *The Watsons go to Florida* at the time. Then I went back and worked on it, but once I got the family to Florida, nothing happened. So I set it aside for a while, until my son brought home a poem by Dudley Randall called "Ballad of Birmingham," about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. As soon as I heard it, I said, 'Ah! The Watson want to go to *Birmingham!*' and I wrote the rest of the story." While the story is not autobiographical, Curtis has said that he can see parts of himself in both Kenny and Byron Watson.

Each day, Curtis worked on the manuscript in the children's section of the local library. At night, his son Steven would help out by typing what he'd written by hand earlier in the day.

But Curtis didn't have a literary agent, so he wasn't sure how to go about getting the book published. He knew that he would have to find some way for someone at the publishing house to read his story. To accomplish that, Curtis submitted the book to Delacorte Press's Contest for a First Young Adult Novel. His editor, Wendy Lamb, recalls opening piles of submissions to the contest and seeing the title *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, "words that filled [her] with curiosity and dread; words that instantly evoked the church bombing where young girls died in Sunday school. Well, [she thought] this person was ambitious, trying to write about something terrible, something important." She decided to take a second look later, and while the characters in the book made it too young to qualify for the contest, she loved it so much that Delacorte decided to publish it anyway.

Everyone—teachers, librarians, critics, and children—loved the book, too, and it went on to be one of the most successful books published in 1995.



**"I've always felt like inside
I was a writer. Whatever
else I've done, I'm
Christopher Curtis/Writer.
It's one of those situations
where if you follow your
dreams, sometimes you're
extremely lucky and
things do come true, and I
feel extremely lucky with
what has happened."**

-Christopher Paul Curtis

